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# Past Perfect: Utopian Visions in Historical Perspective

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who can adapt to any country...and live anywhere.” They are not emigres or exiles, and they may or may not make frequent returns to the Motherland. As a group, they are by necessity more virtual than IRL, forming an imaginary, deterritorialized community that fulfills a postnational dream: they are free to mix and match the nationally specific with the cosmopolitan at their own discretion.

The Global Russians are, perhaps indirectly, a challenge to the paradigm that has become so prominent since Alexander Dugin’s 1997 *Foundations of Geopolitics*, a paradigm that sees geography and the struggle for national territory as fundamental to all international relations. The result is a preoccupation with a quasi-feudal conception of empire unites both satirical dystopias such as Vladimir Sorkoin’s *Day of the Oprichnik* and Mikhail Iuriev’s deadly earnest imperialist utopia, *The Third Empire*. In this context, one of the most utopian elements of the Global Russian idea is its total disregard for geography (an imaginary “nowhere” even more radical than the one posited by “utopia’s” etymological derivation). After a few short years, however, the Global Russians would all but vanish from Russian public discourse, squeezed out by competition from two new geographical flights of fancy: the reinvention of Eastern Ukraine as “Novorossia” and the emphasis on a common “Russian world” supposedly uniting Russian speakers throughout the former Soviet Union.



*Obelisk to Revolutionary Thinkers of All Ages  
Alexander Garden, Moscow (outside the Kremlin Wall)*

**Seton Hall University, Department of History,  
Center of Excellence Symposium Organizing Committee:**

William Connell  
Sara Fieldston  
Nathaniel Knight  
Maxim Matusevich  
Dermot Quinn

## Past Perfect: Utopian Visions in Historical Perspective

A Symposium in Comparative History  
Seton Hall University, Department of History  
January 27, 2017



*Map of Utopia from the first edition of Thomas More’s work.*

The urge to envision an ideal world has been a persistent feature of Western thought since Thomas More published the first literary utopia exactly 500 years ago. As the medieval worldview, built on an assumption of the irredeemable corruption of the temporal world, gave way to the more optimistic perspectives of the renaissance, European thinkers dared to conceive of the possibility that people could transcend the darker sides of human nature and build a society in harmony, justice, and prosperity. Over time utopian models have taken a wide range of forms. Many, as in the case of More’s vision, have remained utopias of the mind, framed as philosophical thought-experiments purposefully removed from lived experience. Situated in the temporal world, utopias are sometimes buried in the past as lost “golden ages” or projected into the future as aspirational visions of human destiny. But the urge to create a living utopia in the here and now has been a powerful force. Some visionaries have sought to realize their ideals on a small scale in planned communities--micro-utopias, meticulously ordered to equalize and maximize the benefits for all members. Others have envisioned utopias encompassing entire societies, brought about by the catalytic power of revolutionary upheaval or the disruptive impact of technological change.

This symposium seeks to explore the phenomenon of utopias in all their incarnations—real and imagined; micro and macro; past, present and future. We seek to situate utopian thinking historically and culturally. Are these visions of a perfect world a distinctive feature of Western modernity or do they tap into a more universal impulse? What can utopias tell us about the societies and eras that produced them? What is the view of human nature underlying utopian ideals? We look to explore the processes by which utopian ideals are developed and disseminated. What sort of people build utopias? What makes some utopian models more attractive than others? What are the conditions in which individuals are prone to affiliate themselves with utopian movements? Finally, we seek to investigate the fate of utopias. Why have utopian communities been so difficult to sustain over time? Have some visions of utopia had more of a lasting impact than others? What is the point at which dreams of utopia cross the line into dystopias—nightmares of oppression, conformity, and the subjugation of the individual?

**Program:** (All panels will take place in the Chancellor's Suite, SHU University Center)

9:00-9:30 Coffee and Introductions

9:30-11:00 **Session 1: American Utopias**

Brigitte Koenig, Seton Hall University  
*By-Path of the Promised Land: The Search for an American Anarchist Utopia*

Fernanda H. Perrone, Rutgers University  
*New Jersey's Utopian Communities*

Moderator: Dermot Quinn

11:00-11:15 Coffee Break

11:15-12:45 **Session 2: Science in Service of Utopia**

Talya Zemach-Bersin, Yale University  
*Educational Utopias: Social Engineering for World Peace, 1919-1950*

Rosemary Wakeman, Fordham University  
*Tomorrowland: New Town Utopias of the 1960s*

Moderator: Sara Fieldston

12:45-1:30 Lunch Break

1:30-3:00 **Session 3: Humanistic and Religious Utopias**

Joanne Paul, University of Sussex  
*The Message of Thomas More's Utopia*

Catherine Osborne, University of Notre Dame  
*"So That We May One Day Be One": Imagining and Inhabiting the Interfaith Church in the American 1960s*

Moderator: William Connell

1960s United States to create buildings where interfaith communities (of Christian denominations or of "Protestants, Catholics, and Jews") could grow closer together, with the ultimate goal of getting beyond all distinguishing boundaries. This was a controversial project for different groups in different ways, but the promise of the interfaith church building was strong enough to attract dozens of attempts during the heyday of the ecumenical movement from the end of World War II to the early 1970s.

Focusing on American Catholic interest in these matters, the paper proceeds in three parts: first, with a brief glance at the churches of "Tri-Faith America" in the 1950s; then, with an examination of three fantasy projects, designed by architects of several faiths and published in the Catholic journal Liturgical Arts during the 1960s; and finally, with a consideration of two ecumenical/interfaith church projects built with Catholic participation during the late 1960s, one in Kansas City and one in Columbia, MD. I analyze each project with respect to its attempt to create denominational unity through architectural intervention, concluding with a reflection on the role of the imagination in the ecumenical movement of the 1960s.

#### **Session 4: Russia's Utopian Visions**

**Katherine Pickering Antonova, Queens College, City University of New York**  
 kpantonova@gmail.com

##### ***Andrei Chikhachev and the Imperial Russian Village as Utopia***

This paper presents the views of Andrei Chikhachev, a provincial landowner from central Russia who kept extensive diaries and enjoyed a minor publicistic career in the mid-nineteenth century. Chikhachev argued against the Westernizing and urbanizing impulses of the leading intellectuals of his day, instead promoting the provincial village composed of landowners, clergy, and peasants as an ideal. Neither a reactionary nor a Slavophile, Chikhachev recognized the need for serfdom to end and was a forceful advocate for serf education, yet based his worldview on a paternalistic, religious conservatism that closely adhered to the values he saw represented in the Imperial family. Ironically, it was the state that first betrayed Chikhachev's utopia by ending serfdom without meaningful consultation with the majority of landowners and on terms that undermined their hopes and plans. In the process, the state arguably undercut its most loyal and stable base of support—a perhaps fatal mistake.

**Eliot Borenstein, New York University**  
 eb7@nyu.edu

##### ***News from Nowhere: Global Russians and the Geopolitics of Utopian Diaspora***

In 2009, media entrepreneur Vladimir Yakovlev, previously credited with creating the term "New Russians," announced a new way of being Russian in the twenty-first century: the "Global Russians." This was a concerted attempt to define an identity for the globe-trotting, border-crossing Russian that was based on positive, cosmopolitan traits, rather than on nostalgia, loss, and displaced ethnicity. Global Russians are Russian-speakers who are, quite literally, home in the world, "people

campaign to construct—literally—a new world. All of the New Town projects shared a utopian rhetoric and conception, an imagery of the marvelous. In a word, the New Town was a glimpse of tomorrow's reality. In all its versions, the adjective "new" meant a model or prototype of the future. New Towns were utopian archetypes: futuristic visions of modern life.

This presentation will focus on New Town utopias in the 1960s. It will concentrate on the impact of the Space Age, cybernetic science and systems analysis on the way new towns, and utopia, were imagined and visualized. The 1960s was an age of optimism and excitement about the future combined with the threat of atomic destruction. The result was a wild assortment of utopian visions of the city that symbolized both fantasies and fears. These space age reveries were a conflicted landscape of modern ideals and the tensions between architecture, environment and technology. The presentation will examine how the logic of cybernetics and systems analysis pervaded ideas about an alternative urban future and both challenged and embodied official discourse. It will also consider the ways in which systems thinking still informs trajectories of future cities and rapid urbanization.

### **Session 3: Humanistic and Religious Utopias**

**Joanne Paul, University of Sussex**  
j.paul@sussex.ac.uk

#### ***The Message of Thomas More's Utopia***

This paper provides an understanding of Utopia within the context of More's wider oeuvre, which is often largely ignored in favor of an exclusive focus on Utopia. By drawing textual parallels with More's other writings, this paper argues that in Utopia More presents a central humanist theme, that of prizing what is held in common over what is one's own. In this way, Utopia becomes a further reflection on the memento mori theme of his other works, in which he makes the argument that "real" life is in fact artificial, and that our true humanity is reflected in our common fate. Ownership therefore becomes a sham, and we ought not to draw any pride from it. By focusing on what is "common" – primarily death – More writes that we can avoid the destruction of the commonwealth. The island of Utopia reflects this truth better than the reality of Europe, and so virtuous philosophers must participate in the stage play while acknowledging it to be artificial. By paying attention to what More says elsewhere about common property and the active life, we can start to understand the enigmas contained within Utopia.

**Catherine Osborne, University of Notre Dame**  
osbornefcr@gmail.com

#### ***"So That We May One Day Be One": Imagining and Inhabiting the Interfaith Church in the American 1960s***

One of the thorniest issues for utopian experiments has always been the construction and distribution of space. Plans for communities often include maps for good reason: the ability of a utopia to function in the real world depends not just on the attitude and commitment of people, but on their ability to function together on the ground and in buildings. This paper examines a variety of attempts in the

3:00-3:15

Coffee Break

3:15-4:45

### **Session 4: Russia's Utopian Visions**

Katherine Pickering Antonova, Queens College, City University of New York  
*Andrei Chikhachev and the Imperial Russian Village as Utopia*

Eliot Borenstein, New York University  
*News from Nowhere: Global Russians and the Geopolitics of Utopian Diaspora*

Moderator: Nathaniel Knight

4:45-5:00

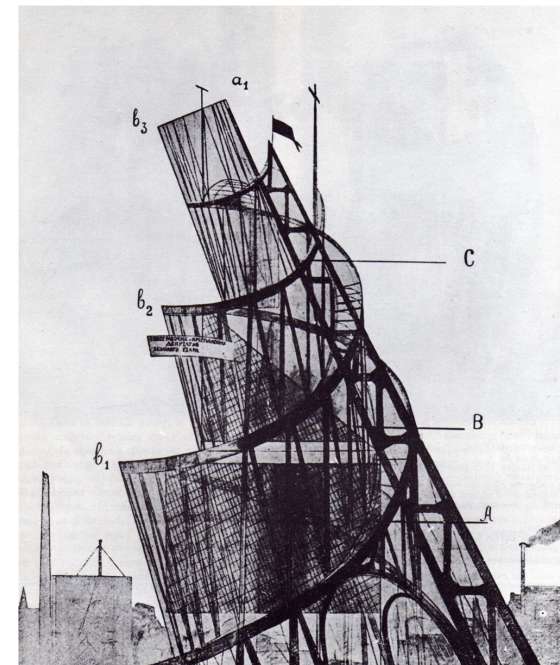
Coffee Break

5:00-5:30

Closing Remarks and Roundtable Discussion

6:30

Dinner: Giorgio's Ristorante, South Orange



Vladimir Tatlin's proposed monument to the Third International, 1920

## Abstracts:

### Session 1: American Utopias

Brigitte Koenig, Seton Hall University.

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#### ***By-Path of the Promised Land: The Search for an American Anarchist Utopia***

This study traces the quest for an American anarchist utopia in thought and action. As anarchists relentlessly critiqued American society in the late nineteenth century, they challenged each other to propose a better alternative. Since an anarchist society at that time existed only in the imagination, anarchists turned to fiction to depict what anarchism would look like. In far-ranging novels including *A Cityless and Countryless World*, anarchist utopians put forth works they hoped would serve as blueprints, or at least as starting points for discussions of collective social change grounded in individual liberty. Inspired by the scenarios described in fictional form, readers explored the formation of utopian societies in communitarian colonies, as they termed them. Colonies, many believed, offered the best possibility of realizing anarchism in the absence of a larger sociopolitical revolution. That anarchists did not succeed in founding a new world order does not negate the significance of their efforts. The anarchist utopian dilemma was the quintessential American dilemma – the Puritan dilemma of being “in but not of” the world; the Jeffersonian dilemma of retaining a nation of yeoman husbandry and agrarian values while fostering modernization and expansion; and the Thoreauian dilemma of escaping from the larger society and challenging it to transform itself. That this dilemma was not easily resolved does not diminish the power of the ideal.

Fernanda H. Perrone, Rutgers University  
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#### ***New Jersey's Utopian Communities***

New Jersey's favorable climate, soil, and proximity to New York and Philadelphia have made it an ideal location for various ideology-based communities. These communities were formed by diverse ideological groups and had disparate histories. Some lasted for only a matter of months while others endure to this day in some form. After first presenting an overview of these communities, this paper will focus on the history of the Modern School and Ferrer Colony. The Modern School was a democratic school operated on anarchist principles as embodied by the Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer. Founded in New York in 1909, the Modern School moved to Piscataway in 1915, where parents and supporters established an anarchist colony focused on the school. At the Modern School, pupils were not compelled to go to class and had a free choice of activities including academics, arts and crafts, and athletics. Although the school closed in 1953, its remarkable legacy speaks to the power of its founding ideals.

### Session 2: Science in Service of Utopia

Talya Zemach-Bersin, Yale University

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#### ***Educational Utopias: Social Engineering for World Peace, 1919-1950***

Though largely forgotten today, Americans living in the first half of the twentieth century cultivated a surge of utopian enthusiasm for the possibilities of social engineering. Drawing from social Darwinism, behaviorist psychology, cultural anthropology, and psychoanalysis, Americans launched a far-reaching effort to cultivate peaceful international relations by adjusting the psychologies and personalities of young Americans – those most malleable members of society. What would be described after World War I as “mental disarmament” and after World War II as a “Manhattan Project of the Mind,” took root in parenting magazines, religious and secular youth groups, and schools from primary to higher education. Cultivated by social scientists, supported by foundations and universities, and disseminated throughout society, the theory proposed that the inner lives of human beings could be conditioned and controlled so as to order, without force or upheaval, a dysfunctional modern world. Such a project, proponents were convinced, would lead to nothing short of a scientifically informed millennium.

This paper examines the historical contexts and social scientific theories that inspired Americans in the aftermaths of World War I and World War II to turn their attention to youth-focused experiments in social engineering. I argue that in postwar moments, when citizens set out to define new eras and make sense of past failures, young people become central figures upon which utopian visions are projected. At the same time, I question the postwar impulse to turn inward and retreat into depoliticized and often sentimental solutions to geopolitical conflict that privilege individual psychological transformation over systemic reform. Drawing from archival research that bridges twentieth century intellectual and cultural history, the history of social science, and the history of U.S. foreign relations, this research refocuses the story of postwar reconstruction on childhood education schemes. The postwar education of young people reveals profound political disillusionment and anxiety over human psychology. It also, however, exposes a pervasive spirit of utopian idealism in which the scientifically informed socialization of children promised to deliver a world redeemed.

Rosemary Wakeman, Fordham University  
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#### ***Tomorrowland: New Town Utopias of the 1960s***

The second half of the 20th century was a “golden age” of New Town development. Throughout Europe and the United States, in the Middle East, India, Australia, Japan, New Towns were seen as a solution to reconstruction, to population resettlement, to a better quality of life and the need for housing and infrastructure, jobs and services. This unrelenting effort to build New Towns was a